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Book Review: *Daschle vs. Thune: Anatomy of a High-Plains Senate Race* By Jon K. Lauck

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Daschle vs. Thune: Anatomy of a High-Plains Senate Race. By Jon K. Lauck. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. xvii + 326 pp. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth.

Historian, political operative, and blogger Jon K. Lauck offers an insider's account of the 2004 United States Senate race in South Dakota. Democrat Tom Daschle, leader of his party in the Senate, sought reelection and was challenged by Republican John Thune. Lauck seeks to explain Thune's surprising victory—or rather, as the account unfolds, Daschle's bitter loss. As is the way with insider accounts, this one produces some striking insights, but is also somewhat limited by its perspective.

Daschle in 2004 struggled, as Lauck puts it, with “the LBJ dilemma”—how to lead a liberal party in Washington while campaigning back home in a red state. On issues such as the war in Iraq, the prescription drug bill, abortion, and gun control, Daschle sought to satisfy conflicting expectations and, too often, said one thing in one venue and something else in another. As a National Rifle Association officer observed, “You can't have it both ways.” The contradictions inherent in Daschle's double life attracted the unwanted attention of “consistency-scrutinizing bloggers”—one of whom, it should be noted, and a partisan one, was Jon K. Lauck, whose weblog, *Daschle vs. Thune*, dogged the Democratic candidate.

Daschle had obvious advantages. From his position of influence he had brought home the bacon to South Dakota communities. He entered the race with the support of the state's largest newspaper (the *Sioux Falls Argus Leader*), a formidable campaign organization, and apparently unlimited finances. He launched his ad campaign early and ran it relentlessly. Thune, meanwhile, invested in county fairs and church suppers and community halls, while his digital allies, the bloggers, attempted to trip up a political giant.

Lauck is spot on when he highlights the importance of the bloggers in turning the campaign. Given the print-news dominance of the *Argus Leader*, the assiduous research and gritty reporting of the bloggers was crucial, and it worked in interesting ways. National weblogs and other media picked up on the South Dakota blogs because of the importance of the Senate race, and that in turn validated them back to people in-state, overcoming print-media dominance.

Crucial, yes, but not the whole story, because communications in the digital era are not confined to things digital. In politics, as in most spheres, what emerges as

the most effective communication strategy is the combination of digital communications with old-fashioned personal contact in the flesh. This is to say, give the bloggers their due, and yes, Daschle did make himself vulnerable—but Thune still had to win the race on the ground. He was an attractive candidate who campaigned well.

Lauck perhaps overstates the importance of ideology in the victory of Thune, here styled as a “child of the Reagan revolution.” It just makes no sense to indict Daschle for his old-fashioned views and style and then to hearken back, as the alternative, to Ronald Reagan. Senate races in the Northern Plains have their own distinctive dynamics, and the Thune victory does not change the fundamentals; it illustrates them.

Lauck's central point about digital communications, however, raises an intriguing issue for historians, because he explicitly invokes the term “memory.” “Daschle lost the war against memory in 2004,” Lauck argues, a point that more than justifies his book. It raises a question much broader than *Daschle vs. Thune*. It implies that with the ready and democratic access to and dissemination of information characteristic of the digital era, public discourse is transformed. This point deserves more digestion.

Oh, and by the way: South Dakota is not in the High Plains. **Thomas D. Isern**, *Department of History, North Dakota State University*.